

J C Kumarappa

A Gandhian economist ahead of his time

Kumarappa was a close associate of Gandhiji and a firm believer in the theory that the village must be made the focus of economic planning. Aware of the dangers of unchecked industrialisation, Kumarappa advocated that human beings should collaborate with nature to meet their needs.

P S SANDHU WARORA

MAHATMA Gandhi's Sevagram ashram in Maharashtra was the appropriate site for a recent conference marking the birth centenary of J C Kumarappa, an economist who became one of Gandhiji's closest associates and the most ardent advocate of his ideas on rural development. Through prolific writing in books and magazines over a period of 20 years, starting in 1929, Kumarappa outlined an economic doctrine that is remarkable for its far-sighted emphasis on conserving the environment.

Kumarappa's ecological concerns grew out of a deep awareness of the harmful effects of unchecked industrialisation. The only sustainable social order, he contended, was one based on what he called the "economy of permanence", wherein human beings collaborate with nature to meet their needs, without disrupting the natural patterns of growth and renewal. This, Kumarappa stressed, could best be achieved through a decentralised model of economic planning aimed at making villages self-sufficient so they make optimum use of local resources. "The recent international conference at Rio," says Devendra Kumar, former secretary of the Gandhi National Memorial Trust, "served to highlight the very issues that Gandhian economics, as developed by Kumarappa, was pointing out."

Kumarappa examined such issues as conservation of water and forests, effect of erosion and waterlogging on soil quality and availability of fodder and fuel in the rural economy. He advocated, among other measures, the manufacture of handmade paper from waste paper and grasses and the use of organic manure instead of chemical fertilisers. "Kumarappa's writings are strewn with profound ecological consequences, though he does not express it in these terms," says Ramachandra Guha, a research fellow at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in New Delhi. "The environmentalists of today are only taking up where he left off."

A lucrative career

The early course of Kumarappa's life did little to presage the part he was to play in national affairs. Born on January 4, 1892, in Tanjore (now Thanjavur), Joseph Chelladurai Cornelius adopted "Kumarappa", the original Hindu name of his family, on joining the national movement in 1929. Kumarappa's father, Solomon Cornelius, was a government officer and a strict disciplinarian. His influence was reflected in Kumarappa's punctuality and methodical habits. Kumarappa's mother, Esther Rajanayakam, was a devout Christian who helped to inculcate in him the moral and spiritual values that were to play an important role in shaping his economic philosophy.



Kumarappa excelled in studies at school and college. After graduating in history from Madras Christian College, he decided to pursue a career in accountancy and was sent to England. He qualified as a chartered accountant in London and embarked on a lucrative career as an auditor for a British firm.

After the First World War ended, Kumarappa returned to India and set up an auditing firm in Bombay. In 1927, he went abroad again, this time to visit his brother who was living in New York. Kumarappa stayed on and obtained a bachelor's degree in business administration from Syracuse University in 1928. He transferred to Columbia University in New York City to study for a master's degree in economics.

During this period he began accepting invitations to deliver weekend lectures on Indian history and culture to small groups. One of these lectures, titled *Why then is*

India poor?, was reported in *The New York Times* and caught the attention of his professor, E R A Seligman, who suggested Kumarappa base his master's thesis on it.

Kumarappa agreed and undertook an exhaustive study of the financial policies and taxation structure prevailing in India. He was shocked to discover that the British authorities had imposed the expenses of their imperial wars on the Indian exchequer. His thesis, titled *Public Finance and Indian Poverty*, described in detail the financial irregularities committed by British institutions and indicted them for impoverishing the Indian people by imposing unjust taxes on them. Kumarappa's biographer, M Vinak, writes, "This study so convinced him of British injustice and exploitation that he turned into a passionate nationalist."

Another important experience for Kumarappa at this time was coming into contact with H J Davenport, who taught a course called *The Economics of Enterprise*. Davenport advocated extreme materialism and held that the sole determinant of any act or policy was the amount of wealth it generated. Kumarappa was repelled by this theory, regarding it as narrow and misguided, and debated frequently with Davenport, attempt-



Little scholar: Kumarappa at 9.

ing to repudiate his theory. In doing so, Kumarappa was compelled to examine and redefine his own viewpoint. He became convinced of the moral and social dimensions of economic decisions and this was to become the turning point in his intellectual life.

Gandhiji's influence

On returning to India, Kumarappa wanted to get his thesis on public finance published, but he first solicited Gandhiji's opinion. An appointment was fixed and on May 9, 1929, Kumarappa met Gandhiji at Sabarmati ashram near Ahmedabad. The meeting was a great success and a bond was immediately established between the two. Gandhiji praised Kumarappa's dissertation and told him, "You are almost the first economist I have come across who thinks along the same lines as I do."

Kumarappa was deeply impressed by Gandhiji and offered his services in the national cause. Gandhiji urged him to acquire a first-hand awareness of rural India and suggested that he should undertake an economic survey of Matar taluka, a once-prosperous rural area in Gujarat that had become impoverished. Gandhiji introduced him to the vice-chan-

Economic survey of a once-prosperous taluka

At Gandhiji's suggestion, Kumarappa undertook a survey of an area in Gujarat that was once most prosperous but had become prey to poverty and famine.

MAHATMA Gandhi wanted Indian economics to be based on facts and figures obtained through rigorously scientific surveys. In 1930, he urged J C Kumarappa to conduct an economic survey of Matar taluka, a famine-stricken area in Gujarat's Kaira district.

Kumarappa's pathbreaking study of conditions prevailing in rural India is still praised. "Even today," says L C Jain, former Planning Commission member, "that survey is such that its depth, scope and coverage have not been excelled."

One of the issues in the survey is the status of natural resources such as soil, water, trees and grazing grounds. "Kumarappa drew attention to the degraded land in the villages and suggested the formation of a village committee to

look after them," says Jain. "After 60 years, the government has got around to setting up a National Wastelands Development Board for the same purpose."

Gandhiji proposed Matar taluka because it was once a prosperous region of Gujarat, watered by four rivers and known for its fertile soil and industrious farmers.

A committee was set up by Gujarat Vidyapith to conduct the survey, with Sardar Patel as the chairperson and Kumarappa as director. From December 1929 to March 1930, the team of nine students and two Gujarat Vidyapith faculty members surveyed 54 villages, with Kumarappa supervising the fieldwork and walking long distances in order to collect data directly from the villagers.

After the survey was completed, Kumarappa spent 18 months analysing the vast amount of data and published the final report in September 1931. "The reader will find that the statistics, presented here in careful schedules, are even

more eloquent than the main body of the carefully worded and lucid report," said Kakasaheb Kalelkar, vice chancellor of Gujarat Vidyapith.

Kumarappa determined poverty in Matar taluka was largely the result of the unjust and shortsighted policies of the British government's revenue, irrigation and agriculture departments. The average income in the region was only 7 pies (3.64 paise) per day, but the government still imposed heavy taxes, including high water tax that was collected even though irrigation facilities were not provided. The villagers were thus trapped in a vicious cycle of debt and destitution.

In addition to calling for a reduction of taxes, Kumarappa recommended wastelands be given over to the villagers for cultivation, with taxes being stayed until the land became profitable. He also urged better utilisation of water resources, providing improved seeds through selection and experimentation and encouraging the use of improved agricultural implements and irrigation devices such as the Persian wheel.

cellor of Gujarat Vidyapith, Kakasaheb Kalelkar, for assistance in the project (See box).

Impressed with Kumarappa, the vice-chancellor offered him a professor's post. Kumarappa accepted the position, but declined to accept any salary in keeping with his commitment to Gandhian ideals. The task of surveying Matar taluka turned out to be challenging and called upon all of Kumarappa's experience and administrative acumen. The fieldwork he had to do gave him exposure to village life.

His years abroad had made Kumarappa thoroughly westernised in dress and manners, but after meeting Gandhiji, he devoted himself fully to the national cause and adopted an austere lifestyle, wearing khadi and embraced the Gandhian philosophy in all respects.

An incident took place during this time that illustrates the adjustments Kumarappa had to make. One of his European friends, John Mackenzie, invited Kumarappa to tea shortly after he had switched to khadi. Kumarappa got a friend to help him don dhoti and kurta. On reaching the Mackenzie home, Mrs Mackenzie opened the door and Kumarappa's instinctive reaction was to doff his Gandhi cap courteously. Much amused, Mrs Mackenzie retorted, "Kumarappa, you must also learn Indian manners. You mustn't take off your cap in greeting, but shed your chappals instead."

Mobilising public opinion

Gandhiji decided to serialise Kumarappa's thesis on "Public Finance and Indian Poverty" in the *Young India* magazine between November 28, 1929, and January 23, 1930. This marked the beginning of Kumarappa's long involvement with the magazine because, at Gandhiji's urging, he became a regular contributor to its columns. Eventually, he even succeeded Mahadev Desai as its editor and used the magazine to mobilise public opinion



Kumarappa's model of decentralised economic planning was influenced to a great extent by Gandhiji.

against the unjust policies and practices of the British in India. Kumarappa rapidly acquired a reputation for bold criticism and in 1931, he was arrested on a charge of sedition and imprisoned. This was the first of his four stays in prison between 1931 and 1944, for a total of

Kumarappa was charged with sedition and imprisoned in 1931. He was jailed three more times — in all for four and half years.

Village Industries Commission (AIVIC), which had been set up in 1934. He shifted to AIVIC headquarters in Maganwadi, Wardha district, and this was his home for 17 years. Among the programmes he launched to revive village industries were oil-pressing, bee-keeping, paper-making, soap-making and pottery. Nirmal Chandra of the Gandhi Peace Foundation in Delhi says, "Kumarappa's efforts went a long way in reviving the self-respect of the villagers."

Never once did Kumarappa waver in his conviction that making villages self-sufficient through small-scale industries was the key to the regeneration of national life. He travelled widely and lectured frequently on the principles of decentralised economic planning. Some of his lectures were later published in a popular booklet called *Philosophy of the Village Movement*.

Lacking support

However, Kumarappa's ideas did not find much support in political circles. In 1937, he was made a member of the national planning committee, which had Jawaharlal Nehru as chairperson. But Kumarappa resigned shortly after to protest the unwillingness of the other committee members to put the village at the centre of planning.

In December 1947, a national conference of revenue ministers was held in Delhi and it decided to set up an agrarian reforms committee to suggest methods of improving rural conditions. Kumarappa was appointed chairperson and the committee submitted its report in July 1949, containing several recommendations favouring land reform through decentralisation. However, none of the recommendations was taken up at either the Central or state level as the government was already committed to a policy of rapid industrialisation.

Effectively marginalised from the political mainstream and disappointed with the government's economic policies, Kumarappa spent the last years of his life

coordinating and guiding the work of activists and voluntary agencies, believing that the Gandhian concepts of village planning could best be implemented by them.

Kumarappa had been troubled by complications arising from high blood pressure for several years and in

1953, his health failed and compelled him to retire from active work. He settled in the Gandhiniketan ashram near Madurai to be among people engaged in the work dear to his heart. Shortly after his 68th birthday, he suffered a stroke and was hospitalised in Madras, where he passed away on January 30, 1960.

Opinion is divided about why Kumarappa was neglected. Some say his model of decentralised planning, with the village as a self-contained economic unit, did not address the issue of how these units would be integrated at the macro-level nor was it clear what relationship would exist between rural and urban communities. "He did not allow for a complementary relationship between villages and industry," says Bharat Jhunjhunwala, a research fellow at the Institute of Development Studies in Jaipur. But Guha states, "Kumarappa's ideas failed to find support because he was ahead of his time. The debate of environment versus development that he had anticipated is still raging and the verdict of history may well decide in his favour."

Another feature of Kumarappa's thought, which he shared with Gandhiji, is his belief that social regeneration could be brought about by a moral appeal to the individual. Individuals, Kumarappa felt, could be persuaded to forsake self-interest voluntarily in favour of the



Forced to retire by ill-health: Kumarappa in 1956.

Kumarappa precipitated the debate on environment versus development. It is still raging.

larger social good. "Kumarappa was too much of an idealist," says Kamal Taori, a bureaucrat who heads the Khadi and Village Industries Commission in Bombay. Taori's remark is ironical for he is the head of the very agency that is entrusted with the implementation of Kumarappa's principles.

Many Gandhians complain bureaucrats have subverted the aims of Gandhian institutions by exploiting them to further their own interests. N S Radhakrishnan, secretary of the Gandhi Peace Foundation for more than 20 years, analysed the lack of impact made by institutions such as the KVIC and said, "Too much bureaucratisation, too much hankering after government grants, which in itself is against the Gandhian ideal, and too many people in these institutions becoming self-appointed agents of undertaking social revolutions."

Kumarappa's neglect in recent times is clearly symptomatic of the decline of Gandhian ideals and institutions in post-Independence India. There is, however, a renewed interest in Kumarappa's pioneering role in emphasising the importance of living in harmony with the environment. The scores of people who gathered at Sevagram recently for his centenary conference bear testimony that his influence survives. ■

From Kumarappa's writings

On the virtues of a natural life

If we have to utilise as food the nutritious elements found in nature, we may get *gur* from palm trees that grow wild on uncultivable lands and obtain the whole benefit of the sap, minus the water which it contains, along with the sugar in a digestible form, and various minerals and salts. But man, in his anxiety to use his knowledge, puts up sugar mills, converts good lands, which may be used for cultivation of cereals, into sugar-cane growing lands and then the sugar-cane is converted into sugar, wasting the bulk of the minerals and salts in the molasses, which are thrown out as unfit for human consumption and from which he prepares rum and gin to poison the people.

On natural resource use

The land we draw our sustenance

from, the water, sunlight, air and the rest of the physical world claim our attention and regard while we strive to satisfy our needs. If we fail to consider these factors, nature will retaliate with violence in the form of pain, disease and death. Taking all these factors into consideration, man has to pick his way through skilfully, so as to obtain the greatest benefit to himself with the least harm to others and the minimum disturbance of the natural order.

On recycling

A scientific use of resources should mean that we get the fullest benefit out of what we find around us. Man, in his eagerness to use mechanical devices, is often irrational in the utilisation of resources. For instance, if paper is to be made out of bamboo by the simple hand process, we do not use

bamboos cut fresh from the forest. The bamboos in the forest, when they are first cut, are used in various ways, for roofing, for being made into mats, sieves, baskets and other household articles and then, when they have served their term as such, the broken and used up bamboo pieces are converted into pulp and paper is made from it.

On forest management

The government will have to radically revise its policy of maintaining forests. Forest management should be guided, not by consideration of revenue but by the needs of the people... Forest planning must be based on the requirements of the villagers around. Forests should be divided into two main classes: 1) those supplying timber to be planned from the long range point of view, and 2) those supplying fuel and grasses, to be made available to the public either free of cost or at nominal rates.